

## READING IN THE DISCIPLINES: USING SPORTS TO STIMULATE CRITICAL THINKING

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Effective reading and thinking are congruent with affective stimulation. If what a person reads lacks emotional appeal, i.e., is unmeaningful or unmotivating, the residual effect will be short-lived and inconsequential.

One area that is provocative and has great meaning for many young people is sports. There is no question that athletes and athletics exert a major influence on people all over the world. Reggie Jackson, the renowned star of the California Angels, recently remarked:

Fifty years ago it was Bogard and Cagney, Twenty-five years ago it was Elvis Presley and Chubby Checker. Now, it's the age of the athlete.

Teachers can make good use of the current passion for sports and sports figures by combining reading instruction in the disciplines with sports-related written material. This approach is especially effective in getting students to *become actively involved with what they read!*

One of the most disconcerting problems faced by teachers in the academic disciplines concerns, not so much students' inability to read, but their helplessness or resistance to thinking deeply about what they read and responding with some measure of critical intensity. These teachers claim most of their pupils can "bark" at print or call the words. However, they frequently fail to "come to grips" with an author's ideas and wrestle intellectually with the text. In the words of Hilda Taba, "they do not generate a 'cognitive commerce' with the printed page."

If one accepts the definition of reading as "thinking," or a medium for employing print as a stimulus to reasoning, and if one agrees that a person can only think about something to the extent that individual has a basis of knowledge or experience concerning it, then it is not surprising many students, given their lack of knowledge and experience in various subject fields, have great difficulty thinking about, understanding, and appreciating much of what they read in school.

Moreover, for critical reasoning to occur as a consequence of reading, the material itself must suit a person. The reader must be motivated and have a background of vicarious or real-life experiences which relate to the reading assignment. These serve as the building blocks which a person uses to interpret what is read and reconstruct or extend understanding. In the final analysis, comprehension and recall are by-products of concentration which is the outgrowth of an aroused interest on the reader's part. Bigge (1971) claimed:

Content that is no so brilliantly structured, but still has much meaning, will be remembered in proportion to its meaning. Nonsense material is headed for extinction before the last syllable is uttered. (p. 290)

The unmeaningful interaction between many students and their textbooks and their failure to exchange ideas, opinions, or sentiments, with supplementary exposition, may account for why so many of them are quick to answer "It's boring," when asked why they do not like this or that subject. In essence, they are saying, what they have read does not speak personally to them and makes no sense to their lives. This may happen for two reasons:

- 1) Many students lack the language experiences to appreciate fully or understand what they are asked to read in school. Many teachers fail to consider these deficits. They overlook the need to use concrete examples as a means of introducing students to those facets of language (orthographic or vocabulary) with which they are unfamiliar.
- 2) Many students lack the vicarious or real-life experiences that allow them to read content based materials insightfully. Many teachers fail to relate new ideas, information,

or learning experiences to students' lives by placing the aforementioned in a context with which they can identify and one through which they discover some personal meaning and value.

Sports happens to be one very meaningful context for a large number of students. These youngsters have developed a wealth of language as well as vicarious or real-life experiences in sports that teachers can use as a backdrop for further learning. The former have watched live sports contents and have seen them on television as well. They have listened to broadcasters, players, or performers describe the action or circumstances surrounding various games and events. In doing so they have acquired sophisticated vocabulary and concepts related to athletics.

Additionally, these students have accumulated a large store of facts and statistics concerning the history of sports, sports figures, rules, strategies, events, and teams. Many are stimulated to *apply or demonstrate* what they know and frequently they *want to learn more!*

Sports and reading instruction in the disciplines do hand-in-hand for several other reasons:

- Both sports and reading skills in the disciplines can promote independence, aggressiveness, assertiveness, ambitious desire for achievement, success, prestige or recognition, self-control and a sense of mastery.
- The two areas require sound coaching/teaching methods; good models; structured, consistent, and individualized guidance; continuous reinforcement; sequential acquisition of fundamental skills; plenty of practice; and a lifetime of development.
- The physical fitness boom has captivated men and women, young and old, able-bodied and handicapped alike. Because of this intense public interest in athletics, sports magazines, the sports sections of newspapers, biographies of sports heroes, publications containing sports quotes, superstitions, poetry, and humor can be used by teachers to accelerate students' reading skills in the disciplines. They can: (1) provide students with opportunities for vocabulary and language enrichment; (2) appeal to their interests and encourage them to become active readers instead of passive word callers; (3) give students opportunities to distinguish between fact and opinion; (4) provide chances to collect and organize data; (5) prompt students to locate likenesses and differences in their reading and urge them to criticize an author's ideas or evaluate them for strengths and weaknesses; (6) inspire students to do inductive as well as deductive thinking and stimulate interpretive or creative levels of assessment; and (7) expose students to various circumstances which require them to perform problem solving operations.

### Suggested Activities

Teachers can employ sports-related reading materials to supplement curricula in various academic disciplines and motivate students to practice and apply reading/thinking skills at higher levels. The following types of activities are easily incorporated into the areas of English, math, social studies, health, and science. These examples are not meant to be whole instructional packages, but to serve as models from which classroom teachers might generate numerous other activities in their specific subject fields. They should not be employed as simply paper and pencil drills. A more acceptable approach would consist of using these ideas to stimulate group discussion and provide a context wherein students are encouraged to practice related reading or writing skills. Those teaching in lower grades can modify the language or format of these to suit their specific purposes.

### Sports in English or language arts:

Using the following kinds of statements from newspapers or sports magazines, instructors can stimulate students' interest in vocabulary, language, math, and social studies while encouraging them to recognize simile or metaphor, perform deductive/inductive reasoning, and calculate solutions to arithmetic problems.

Last year, neither Baylor nor Singleton could throw a baseball through a spider's web. Baylor's arm has always been considered as useful as adenoids.

Directions: Ask students to read the above statement and respond

to the following questions:

1. Why has the author used the image of a "spider's web" to describe Baylor's and Singleton's pitching? (Metaphor)
2. What does the statement, "As useful as adenoids" mean? (Simile)  
True or false: Defend your answers!  
1. Baylor has the better throwing arm.  
2. Singleton's arm is much stronger than Baylor's.  
3. Baylor and Singleton both pitch.  
4. They both play baseball.

- \* The favorite sports of Bruce, Harvey, Ike, and Teresa are baseball, hiking, ice skating, and tennis.

Directions: Ask students to read the above statement and keeping in mind that no person's name begins with the same letter as his or her favorite sport respond to the following true/false statements:

1. Teresa and Harvey do not like team sports. (Explain)
2. Harvey and Bruce do not like cold-weather sports. (Explain)
3. What is each person's favorite sport?

\* More and more ballplayers, you may have noticed, are to be seen digging handfuls of small things from their pants pockets, popping them into their mouths, executing complex masticatory maneuvers and spitting odd little flecks into the breeze.

Directions: Ask students to read the above statement and answer the following true/false questions:

1. The author is probably referring to football. (Defend your answer)
2. Masticatory maneuvers refers to jumping up and down. (Explain!)
3. The ballplayers are probably popping raisins into their mouths.
4. If you think the answer to number 3 is false, identify what the players are doing.

To teach sports poetry, have students read, for example, "To An Athlete Dying Young," by A. E. Housman, and answer the following questions:

1. What is the tone of Housman's poem?
2. What sense do you get for an athlete's future?
3. Is there any value in having been a great athlete?  
Why or why not?
4. What is the author's advice to those who would so dedicate themselves?
5. Does the author leave you with a feeling that fame and glory are longlasting and highly prized?
6. Write a poem of your own expressing your feelings toward a sport or great athlete.

To get students interested in reading biography, introduce them to a brief episode taken from a book and used as an "interrupted" story. For example, an instructor might excerpt a couple of pages from *Jesse*, by Jesse Owens and Paul Neimark and copy these for the class. Try and choose a portion of the story that tells of a dramatic moment in the individual's life or a part that you think is sure to "hook" the group and stimulate real interest. After reading the selection and discussing it, make a couple of copies of the book available to students. Give the students a date and time to report to the class on some further events in the life of Jesse Owens.

To interest students in broadening their vocabularies and challenge them to make generalizations or inferences, ask them to look over the following list of clues that will provide them the necessary information to pick the National Football League team and match the correct city and corresponding mascot:

Clue	City	Mascot
Example—King of beasts	Detroit	Lions
1. Army insect	(New York)	(GI/ants)
2. 7 squared	(San Francisco)	(Forty-niners)
3. Bad news _____	(Chicago)	(Bears)
4. A 747	(New York)	(Jets)
5. Hostile attackers	(Oakland)	(Raiders)
6. Various iron workers	(Pittsburg)	(Steelers)
7. Suntanned bodies	(Cleveland)	(Browns)
8. IOU's	(Buffalo)	(Bills)
9. Help to relocate	(Green Bay)	(Packers)
10. Flipper's family	(Miami)	(Dolphins)

### Sports in Math and Social Studies:

Have students read statements like the following and answer

the questions:

- \* Last year Tony Dorsett ran for a total of 1,680 yards. Ron Springs ran for 1,120 yards. Robert Newhouse gained 890 yards rushing.
1. How many yards did Dorsett and Newhouse gain on the ground?
  2. What is the total number of yards gained by all three runners?
  3. What is the difference between the total yardage compiled by Springs and Newhouse? Between Dorsett and Springs? Between Newhouse and Dorsett?

The same three running backs caught passes totalling 650 yards for Dorsett, 598 yards for Springs, and 425 yards for Newhouse.

1. What is the total number of passing yards gained by the three players? Is it greater or less than the total rushing yardage?
2. What is the difference between the number of yards Springs was able to gain on the ground compared to those he gained through the air?
3. Why do you suppose the totals are much less for passing as opposed to rushing?

Have students read statements like the following and answer the accompanying questions.

- \* Davis was paid \$225,000 for his first fight—\$185,000 by CBS and \$40,000 by promoters in the "Big Apple." He has three more fights on the same contract with CBS, each calling for \$185,000.
1. What percentage of Davis's first fight was paid by CBS?
  2. What is the difference between the percentage paid by the promoters and that paid by CBS?
  3. How much does CBS pay Davis for all four fights?
  4. What are Davis's total earnings for this contract?
  5. In what city was the first fight held?

### Sports in Health or Science:

The ability to keep records and read graphs, charts, and pictorial material is important in many content areas. Students must make assumptions, comparisons, inferences, and conclusions based on these diagrams. The following activity provides students with one such reading opportunity and requires them to record, collect, organize, and interpret data.

Provide students with stop watches. First, pair students for recording each others pulse rate at rest. Ask them to record these statistics on a chart. Discuss the differences among class members. Next, ask them to take turns running in place for two minutes and record these figures as well. How do the rates differ? Why did they increase? Finally, ask them to measure the heartbeat after a two-minute recovery period. How many returned to their original rates? Why are some about the same as they were at rest, while others are still somewhat accelerated?

As a follow-up activity, ask for volunteers to go on a jogging program for two weeks. At the end of that time, have the whole class repeat the experiment. Are there any differences between the volunteer joggers' figures and those of the rest of the students? Discuss reasons for these changes.

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